

Companion to the lectures of **Harold J. Isaacson** on haiku, called “The Shiki Course”, summer 1959, part I. Lectures published on www.archive.org. Keywords for the lecture: “haiku” “isaacson”.

Lecture #1, page 1:

To Cherry-blossomes

*YE may simper, blush, and smile,
And perfume the aire a while:
But (sweet things) ye must be gone;
Fruit, ye know, is comming on:
Then, Ah! Then, where is your grace,
When as Cherries come in place?*

Comment: Harold Isaacson also discoursed on the English poet Herrick. From the typescript of this course, presumably also made by David Landman are the following remarks, which refer directly to the study of haiku:

All of Herrick's poems are an exercise in sound; trying to find the real sound for saying something, anything. That's why they are short; to make reverberation possible among the limited number of units.

The vocal structure is an important thing for Herrick; you should memorize and recite some of them and recognize the inner dynamics of the poems. Close reading will show that poetry can effectuate things.

With his poems Herrick tries to preserve. Like all true poets he knew the great problems in society and wanted to turn back the decay of English life. Herrick's poetry cannot be studied without the context of society; its history and struggle.

Two related properties show themselves easily.

What we call “*wittiness*” has a strong root in the desire to liberate mankind. The things you laugh at, won't rule you.

The other thing is the “*sweetness*” of Herrick's poetry. All his poems are light-hearted attempts at saying things. Even terrible things are said in a light way. “The succession of the four sweet months” is a good example. Notice that he stays out of the heat of summer. The reader should ask every time what the substance is of a poem, what went into it.

All poems are important. In fact no isolated reading of Herrick's poems is possible. You have to read the whole book.

An enormous amount of moving power is present in these small poems. Herrick shows that one thing can bring forth another thing. The sweet, the bitter; the joy, the sadness.

This is exemplified throughout in Herrick's book. These opposing emotions can be dealt with in 3 ways;

the two forces can be stated explicitly in a certain poem, as e.g. in “Faire days: or, Dawnes deceitful”, “The Changes to Corinna” and “All things decay and die”.

Another possibility is that opposing emotions arise out of the lines themselves. Sweet lines can bring forth horror and the other way around.

A third way to show the other side of a thing is complicated. Herrick uses opposite poems somewhere else in the book. The poem “To Music, to becalme his Fever” e.g. has “Upon a hoarse singer” as a counterbalance, which runs:

*Sing me to death: for till thy voice be clear,
'Twill never please the pallate of mine eare.*

Love-poems can bring forth scary feelings; the shadow of every poem can be underlined by counterpoems.

Herrick's poems have to be studied thoroughly for the change of tone within the poem; e.g. "On Himself", "On Cherry-blossoms" and "To Silvia to Wed". The sweetness is the easiest aspect to grasp, and everybody does grasp it. But critics who think that Herrick is all sweet are ignorant.

Without knowing something about his theory of opposition, you cannot understand him. The horror gathers force from the sweetness it is meant to oppose. This mechanism disturbs you. Horror as an end in itself is not the intention, though. "Again" shows the poet turned into his wishes. There is something terrible about the image of being turned into an ear and melting away. Herrick is absorbed in love. But one is astounded as he repeatedly says the opposite of the love-poems. He does so in a bold and courageous way. See e.g. "The Frozen Heart" and "To Perilla". Image the force in a poem like "How lilies came white".

Herrick's poems are full of an essence of life, the life of a man; his poems are very actual. The reader can take the literal meaning rather often.

Study "Being once blind, his request, to Biancha" and "The Meaddows". The first verse of "The Meaddows" is so cramped, that it can open out into the others.

Note that he changes the "Ye" to "You", thus opening out the sound.

The poem goes very far: all of a sudden it flows and gives the strong impression of length.

This technique is infinitely dazzling. Herrick expresses the shadow of life, but his real subject is to bring forward something delightful. The shadow is needed to bring the "good" or "delightful" into being. Look at "Cheerfulness in Charitie: or the sweet sacrifice" for an explicit statement.

"To Electra" exemplifies once again how the real thing is brought forward. Starting with horrors, but in the end it's all the other thing. The word "weary" brings out the real character more fully. "Upon a comely, and curious Maide" is one of the most forceful poems in English; it has a dizzy power. Herrick isn't sensuous: he creates, he is master over the senses. Ideas and sounds are at his disposal. He is not the slave of impressions.

Comment: The sentence: "That's why they are short; to make reverberation possible among the limited number of units" is most important for the study of haiku. Also the remarks on the light-heartedness and on sound. Isaacson does not favour the use of syllable counting in English haiku and translations. He stresses the number of idea units instead, the division being 2+3+2 units.

Comment: At the end of page 5 of the notes, crossing over to page 6 we find an example of the thought of bringing something out, by concentrating on something else.

Page 1

冬の夜や何に驚く犬の夢

Huyu-no yo ya / nani-ni odoruku / inu-no yume

A winter-night ya / What does he startle at? / The dog's dream

Don't feel insulted if I begin this course with this haiku. A dog is very important.

Comment: One feels the lecturer is teasing his students, waiting for a response. It's summer, and here he is talking about a winter night and a dog too. A dog who dreams, of all things. Abruptly there is a change of season, a change of perspective away from the self to another sentient being. Silly thing to be dreaming and be startled at something! But this is the condition of man himself!

Even in the darkest of dark nights, the winter night, the mind makes up all things and is startled by it. In Germany many people wrongly say: “habe ich mich aber erschreckt!”, „gosh, did I frighten myself!“. “Erschrecken” is not reflexive, but in a deeper sense, the speaker is not making a mistake.

Page 2:

富士詣で白衣に朱印戴きます

Fuji moude / hakui-ni syuin' / itadakimasu

The Fuji pilgrims / onto white garments crimson seals / they graciously permit

White garment: Purely white. Pilgrim's robe. State of mind in which you don't want to return to world. You wouldn't want to impart your knowledge or write poetry. But as you go up Fuji, at the various way-houses they stamp red seals on the white robe, which the pilgrim graciously permits. That is Haiku, Crimson seals. You can write Haiku if you graciously consent to be stained with humanity. This Haiku is intended to help you in writing Haiku.

Comment: these remarks are in harmony with those from a lecture on Zen by Harold Isaacson, where the famous poem of Hui Neng is discussed. This poem, to be found in Wikipedia, is famous for its denial of the ideas of a poem by a monk of the same monastery, who wanted to apply for the position soon to be vacant of patriarch, the sixth patriarch starting with Bodhidharma, who was the first one in China. That monk wrote on a wall of the monastery. But the applicant wanted to remain anonymous and wanted only to reveal himself after some signs of acceptance by his fellow-monks, and after being pressed by the fifth patriarch. Most of it is history and is well expounded upon in Wikipedia. The original poem runs:

*The body is a Bodhi tree,
the mind a standing mirror bright.
At all times polish it diligently,
and let no dust alight.*

It is easy to see the flaw. And Hui Neng could score his point without effort:

*Bodhi is no tree,
nor is the mind a standing mirror bright.
Since all is originally empty,
where does the dust alight?*

何	本	明	菩
處	來	鏡	提
惹	無	亦	本
塵	一	非	無
埃	物	台	樹

Other translations are possible, like: “There is no Bodhi-tree, / Nor stand of a mirror bright. / Since all is void. / Where can dust alight?” But the general impression is clear. Not this, not that, getting rid of all distinctions. But there is a wonderful turn of this story, not much quoted. From “The Diamond Sutra and The Sutra of Hui Neng”, translated by A.F. Price and Wong Mou-Lam: “You are now the Sixth Patriarch,” said he. “Take good care of yourself, and deliver as many sentient beings as possible. Spread and preserve the teaching, and don't let it come to an end. Take note of my stanza:

*Sentient beings who sow the seeds of enlightenment
In the field of causation will reap the fruit of Buddhahood.
Inanimate objects void of Buddha-nature
Sow not and reap not.”*

Harold Isaacson's translation runs:

*If one has feelings one comes to plant seeds
As a result from the earth there spring fruit*
With no feelings there is no seed
And even the Mujo nature does not get born.*

**and Karma springs up; effects are born from the fruit.*

All things (諸行, syogyoo) have no permanence (無常, muzyoo), but for the realisation or understanding of this one needs to be immersed into being first. Even the gods of Buddhism have to become human beings in order to enter into Nirvana. So, the fifth patriarch is saying to his successor: “You'd better have feelings. If you stop all seeds, you will never develop the Buddha nature”. The fifth patriarch tries to convince Hui Neng that he must teach, must have feelings. Must get involved with other beings. You have to get wet, to save out of the water. It wonderfully says in the quoted haiku 戴きます, “I humbly have received”. Now we have these three possibilities in life: either to walk with a white garment through it, or to have it stained but one would rather have it otherwise or to graciously allow the stains. In the case of the Fuji-pilgrims it would look rather odd if a person would go to the top without the crimson stamps on his garment.

The first poem cited from the Man'yoosyuu is number 238. The romanization is a bit warped:

#238 大宮の内まで聞ゆ網引すと網子調ふる海人呼び声

oho-miya-no uti made kikoyu abiki-su to ago totonohuru ama-no yobikowe

[following the hiragana: the long “o” is “o-ho”; shi=si; si-nigori=zi; ti-nigori=di; etc.]

A poem spoken on the fly, an answer to a request by the Emperor. Hesitation would be impolite and a token of incompetence. The court then most probably was in Naniwa, now Osaka. The naturalness and ease is the spirit of Japanese poetry.

This poem is not a “refrain-poem”, or “short” poem closing a longer poem. It stands on itself. This applies also to the following ones.

#15 わたつみの豊旗雲に入り日見し今夜の月夜さやに照りこそ

watatumi-no toyo-hata-kumo-ni iri-hi mi-si koyoi-no tukuyo saya-ni teri-koso

#42 潮騒に伊良虞の島邊漕ぐ船に妹乗るらむか荒き島廻を

siho-sawi-ni irago-no sima-be kogu hune-ni imo noru-ramu ka araki simami wo

The preface of the Kokinsyuu has this beautiful statement of fact, posing as a question.

花に鳴く鶯、水に住む蛙の声を聞けば生きとし生けるもの、いずれか歌をよまざりける

Hearing the warbler sing among the blossoms and the frog that lives in the water-is there any living thing not given to song?

The Spring mist poem is #31

はるがすみ立つを見すてて行く雁は花なき里に住みやならへる

Those boisterous beings never will grasp the meaning of flowers, do they? They don't grudge the spring mist that veils the cherry blossoms.

The cited poem from the Sin'kokin'syuu is well known, written by the compiler of the collection Hudihara-no Sadaie:

#363 見わたせば花も紅葉もなかりけり浦の苫屋の秋の夕暮れ

mi-watase-ba hana-mo momidi-mo nakari-keri ura-no toma-ya-no aki-no yuhu-gure

The repetition "mo-mo-mo" is wonderful, the "mi-watsu" likewise, "the gaze goes over the scenery". But there are no such things as flowers and red autumn leaves at that moment (excluding an occasional 花帰り, "return of flowers" of the *prunus autumnalis*). The repetition of "mo" sound like the repetition of "mu" in the Heart Sutra. And yes, we have a real negation: 無, mu, in なかりけり, with the reverberating "-keri", making the "not being there" closely felt, extended in time. Those wonderful things, pink and white blossoms and scarlet leaves not there, all colour has disappeared it seems. We have 無色, don't we? The 無色 indeed of the Heart Sutra, "no form", which reads like "no colour". But in this Sutra we have also 無無, not-not to remind us that it is silly to cling to 無 for long. And then we have this hut with a thatched roof at a bay when an autumn day ends, yes when autumn itself ends.

Elegance of simple life: We leave the crowds at their parties under flowers and scarlet leaves and gather in yonder thatched hut, shall we?

The reader is encouraged to publish his or her remarks on archive.org. Perhaps students of the class of 1959 can put themselves to writing on what they have learned and how they have applied it in their lives. The keywords: "Haiku" and "Isaacson" will do I think to link them together.